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THE OPERATION OF TASK FORCE BAUM (4TH ARMORED DIVISION)
BETWEEN ASCHAFFENBURG AND HAMMELBURG, GERMANY,
27-28 MARCH 1945
(CENTRAL EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a PW at Oflag VIII-B, Hammelburg)

*should be
XIII B*

Type of operation described: TASK FORCE ON A SEPARATE MISSION

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* Stalag: German abbreviation for any standard PW Camp.

* Oflog: German abbreviation meaning officers PW Camp.

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INTRODUCTION

The American armies in Europe had, from the initial landings on the beaches of Normandy, fought well and heroically against a veteran enemy, an enemy who had from the desert of North Africa to the Steppes of Russia proved himself to be both able and dangerous on the field of battle. However, fighting on two fronts, against overwhelming forces in manpower on the east and against well equipped and well supplied troops on the west, the Germans were forced to withdraw from the outer bastions of Fortress Europe to the heart of the Fatherland.

At the time of this operation, the Allied armies had just completed five weeks of effort which saw all hostile forces cleared west of the Rhine River. In addition to the closing of the Rhine, two crossings had been effected which set the stage for the final phase of the war in Europe, the Battle for Germany. (See Map A)

GENERAL SITUATION

The French First Army had, by 9 February, secured the Rhine river-line from Strasbourg to the Swiss border and then settled down to lightly secured holding positions. (1)

From 22 February until 11 March, 1945, after violent and steady effort on the part of the Canadian First Army; British Second Army; U.S. Ninth Army; and U.S. First Army; allied control of the west bank of the Rhine was secured from Nijmegen in Holland south to Switzerland with only the gap between Stras^sbourg and Coblenz still in enemy hands. (2)

(1) A, p. 45; (2) A, p. 46.

The U.S. Seventh Army, on 14 March, attacked northward along the river to form a juncture with the Third Army which, with XII Corps in the lead, had crossed the Moselle River and was racing east toward the Rhine. (3)

Late on 22 March, the 5th Infantry Division, XII Corps, ^{in the lead,} made a river crossing at Openheim, followed the next morning by the 4th Armored Division. Two days later, the 4th Armored broke out of the bridgehead and in a series of long, hard drives reached the banks of the Main River. (4) By 25 March Combat Command "A" had secured a bridge near Hanan. Combat Command "B" captured an undamaged railroad bridge across the river, and after attacking throughout the night 25-26 March and most of the following day had established a bridgehead near Schweinheim just south of Aschaffenburg. (5)

The enemy, knocked off balance by the unexpected crossing at Openheim, had not been able to recover in time to prevent the crossings of the Main, but the resistance put forth in counterattacks against the bridges indicated that the German command had succeeded in getting some reserves into the area in spite of Allied air cover. (6)

DEVELOPMENT OF TASK FORCE BAUM

On 26 March, Headquarters, Third Army ordered Combat Command "B" of the 4th Armored Division to dispatch a task force of approximately two company strength, to a prisoner of war camp in the vicinity of Hammelburg, Germany, a distance of approximately seventy or eighty kilometers in rear of the enemy lines. (7)

Captain Abraham Baum, S-2 of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, was selected to lead the force. (8) The mission, as later explained by General Patton, was "...first to impress the Germans with the idea that we were moving east, whereas we intended to move due north, and second, to release some nine hundred American prisoners of war who were at Hammelburg." (9)

(3) A, p. 47 (4) B, p. 314-316; (5) C; (6) I; (7) E, p. 24 (8) F, p. 119; (9) G, p. 275.

Organization of the task force began immediately upon receipt of the orders. "C" Company, and a platoon of light tanks from "D" Company of the 37th tank Battalion; "A" Company, an assault gun platoon, and a reconnaissance platoon from the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion; plus a few medics were alerted to move sometime after dark on 26 March. (10)

Task Force Baum, as the organization was called was composed of 10 officers and 282 men, well-trained, disciplined and battle tested. Once organized, the column consisted of ten medium tanks, six light tanks, three 105-mm assault guns, twenty-seven halftracks, six peeps, and a medic "weasel." (11)

The 4th Armored Division had been fighting and moving steadily for the past four or five days. The warning order for formation of the task force was not received in time to permit the men, already tired, to rest or sleep prior to departure. Nor was there sufficient time to consider important details such as extra maps, air support, extra gasoline, extra ammunition and conduct once the objective had been attained. (12)

The quickest and most direct route to Hammelburg according to the map, was along the Aschaffenburg-Loehr autobahn, over the Saale River at Gemunden, and northeast to the prison camp. (see Map B)

Terrain between the Aschaffenburg area and Hammelburg, although hilly and heavily wooded, nevertheless offered good firm standing for tanks and armored vehicles, even in moderately wet weather. Although the rainy season was at hand, the weather was dry and warm, with a high overcast. There was no moon and the nights were dark. (13)

THE BREAKOUT AT SCHWEINHEIM

Three battalions of the 4th Armored Division Artillery were moved after dark to positions enabling them to give close support to the task force in its breakout from the bridgehead. Under cover of this artillery fire upon Schweinheim, "B" Company of the 37th tank (10) F, p. 118; (11) F, p. 119; (12) F, p. 119; (13) H.

Battalion and "B" Company of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion moved forward and commenced an assault upon the town in order to open a passage which Task Force Baum could use in its initial step toward the prison camp at Hammelburg. (14)

The fight for the town lasted from 2100 hours 26 March until about 0130 hours the next morning. Through heavy artillery fire and repeated assaults by the tank-infantry teams, a path was finally beaten open, enabling the task force, medium tanks in the lead, to move through the town without loss. (15)

Once out of Schweinheim the column headed due east, bypassing Aschaffenburg which was still in German hands. (16)

As he pulled out of the town the task force commander placed his light tanks ahead of the mediums to act as armored security. They remained there until they came to the first town, Hailbach,, where some resistance was encountered. Here the light tanks pulled aside to permit the mediums to move up the street first. Enemy defenses were light and the lead elements, firing as they went, were able to roll through without stopping. This system of rapid movement in the dark with machine guns firing at all possible targets was very successful in keeping enemy heads down. (17)

The column passed through Grunmorsbach, turned north and kept on through two more small towns, still using the medium tanks to punch holes whenever necessary. On the Aschaffenburg-Lehr road, the task force swung east with the light tanks leading off toward Lehr, nearly thirty miles away. (18) Although the enemy made some efforts to halt the column as it passed through villages along the way, the speed and violence of retaliation smothered all opposition, and the task force was able to continue its move without loss of any vehicles. (19)

(14) F, p. 121; (15) F, p. 122-123; (16) F, p. 126; (17) E; (18) F, p. 126; (19) F, p. 126.

On the outskirts of Lohr the light tanks ran into a barricade across the highway and pulled aside to let the medium tanks smash through. The enemy resistance here was heavier than that previously encountered, and the task force, though successful in overrunning the road block, was unable to neutralize the opposition completely and did not escape unscathed. A ~~German~~ bazooka disabled one of the medium tanks but the crew was picked up by an infantry halftrack as it came by. (20)

Immediately after forcing its way through this road block, the task force ran into a convoy of German trucks moving into Lohr from the direction of Gemunden. Without slowing, the armored column overran the convoy, leaving it badly crippled. (21)

From Lohr, the highway follows the left bank of the Main River into Gemunden, paralleling one of the main railroad lines that the enemy was using in his frantic efforts to reinforce his defenses in the Aschaffenburg-Hanau area. (22) While on this route, the task force met several trains headed west under cover of darkness and, following orders to create havoc and confusion in the enemy's rear, fired on every train encountered. (23)

When the column arrived at the outskirts of Gemunden shortly after daylight, the railroad yards were found packed with trains awaiting clearances to move. Captain Baum relayed this information, via a divisional liaison plane, to 4th Armored Headquarters and later in the day a medium bomber raid was mounted on the town, paralyzing all traffic (24) and destroying, among others, a freight train loaded with captured American (25) cigarettes, candy, and fruit bars destined for German troops at the front.

In Gemunden, a railroad and highway focal point and division marshalling area, (26) the force met stiff but not too well organized resistance and it became necessary for the infantry to deploy in

(20) I; (21) I; (22) H; (23) F, p. 127; (24) F, p. 123; (25) J;

(26) E, p. 5.

order to give the tanks close in protection against the dangerous panzerfaust attacks. (27)

Another tank was lost to the task force when it was hit by a panzerfaust fired from the second story window of a building. Two of the crew members were slightly wounded. (28)

A short time later three officers, including the task force commander, were hurt when a third tank was put out of action. Several casualties among the infantry added to the price the column paid in moving through the town. (29)

In order to follow the planned route to Hammelburg it was necessary to cross a bridge over the Saale River in the center of town. Just as the head of the column fought its way to the bridge, a German demolition team on the other side of the river succeeded in blowing it. Two infantrymen working their way toward the bridge were killed in the explosion. (30)

Another crossing point had to be found before the force could continue toward its objective. With much difficulty and the loss of another medium tank the force, covered by the reconnaissance section, disengaged itself from the action and headed north along the left bank of the Saale, looking for another bridge. The Sinn River flowing from the northwest into the Saale, forced the column to veer to the left even farther from its objective. (31)

The column, probing and searching for a crossing, followed the river for 10 or 12 kilometers to Burgsinn, where it found, with the guidance of a prisoner, a bridge that could be used. (32)

After crossing the Sinn, the column moved east through heavily wooded hills, feeling its way toward Graffendorf where, according to a German civilian, they would find another good bridge. (33)

(27) I; (28) I; (29) I; (30) I; (31) F, p. 129; (32) F, p. 129; (33) F, p. 129.

Once in Graffendorf, where the task force inadvertently liberated a Russian labor camp, it headed for the river, found the bridge, crossed and started up the steeply graded road into the village of Weikersgruben, only four miles from Stalag Hammelburg, the objective. (34)

APPROACH TO HAMMELBURG

On the way into Weikersgruben a German liaison plane flew over the column, which immediately pulled to the sides of the road and prepared to open fire. The plane circled the area but did not come within firing range so the vehicles moved back into the road and continued toward Hammelburg. In the approach to the next village, Ober Eschenbach, two German tanks were seen about a mile northeast of town. Shots were exchanged but the Germans withdrew without causing any damage and the task force continued its movement, using the reconnaissance patrol to observe for possible reappearance of the enemy tanks on the flank. (35)

Since there was enemy armor in the vicinity the task force commander decided to split the column into two elements. In the event of attack, one element was to take the shortest route to the camp while the other element, consisting of the medium tanks and assault guns, engaged the enemy. (36)

The medium tanks were leading the column and had turned east from Unter Eschenbach onto the road along the river, when the reconnaissance plane was again spotted overhead. Every 50 caliber machine gun opened fire. The plane, well within range, seemed to jolt from the impact and wobbled off to crash somewhere in the valley behind. (37)

A few minutes after the plane was shot down the medium tanks surprised a column of three German Mark III tanks and some lightly armored vehicles moving along the road from Pfaffenhausen. (See Map C) (34) F, p. 130; (35) I; (36) I; (37) H.

The task force commander although not expecting trouble from that direction was nevertheless ready for the action. He directed the mediums and two of the three assault guns to engage the enemy while the remainder of the column, minus two infantry platoons, moved up the hill to the PW camp as planned. (38)

The tanks took positions in hull defilade behind the Hammelburg-Unter Eschenbach road and opened fire on the foremost German tank. The surprised enemy immediately deployed into the field in an effort to return the fire. Caught on the river flats in a restricted maneuvering area, blinded by smoke shells fired by the assault guns and forced to stand in the face of almost point blank HE and AP fire from the American tanks behind the road, the enemy had little chance of victory. (39) All three German tanks and their accompanying armored vehicles were knocked out, but four American halftracks and two peeps were hit by enemy fire as they sought to work their way up the hill toward the prison camp. (40)

THE ASSAULT ON THE CAMP

The Hammelburg stalag, a former boys' military camp, was located atop a plateau that sloped gently upward from the prison buildings for five or six hundred yards and then dropped precipitously several hundred feet to the flats along the Saale River and the town of Hammelburg. A road crossing the river from Hammelburg at the foot of the steep hills made a three way fork; one running west through Unter Eschenbach, a second turning east along the river, and the third road angling to the south east up the face of the hill. Other roads along the top of the plateau led to the south and southeast through the wooded hills past bazooka and antitank ranges that were used by the troops in the vicinity for training purposes.

(38) I; (39) I; (40) H.

Hammelburg was a large camp, containing several thousand prisoners and was divided according to nationality, into compounds for Russians, Poles, Serbians, French, British, and Americans. The American compound, Oflag VIII B, containing officers only, was located at the northeastern end of camp, adjacent to the road.

Officers captured during the Battle of the Bulge slept in the same cubicles with officers captured before the Battle of Kasserine Pass in Africa and they all had the same desire... to get out.

Colonel Paul Good, the senior American officer, and staff, maintained standards of cleanliness, conduct and appearance which were the same as in any military establishment. This did much to prevent complete moral and mental stagnation of many of the prisoners. However the food ration of between 1100 and 1200 calories per day was insufficient to maintain strength. The urge to escape, plus the meager rations, coupled with indications that the Germans intended to evacuate all prisoners from the camp and march them down into the Bavarian Redoubt, resulted in a general lowering of morale. (41)

Early on the evening of 26 March a Serbian prisoner sneaked into Oflag VIII B and told of rumors among the German guards that the American armies were, at one point, within 15 kilometers of Hammelburg. Though rumors, they were a definite morale-raising factor for the Americans.

The next morning found many of the prisoners, in spite of a studied casualness, looking toward the northwest in the hope of seeing friendly troops with the Wehrmacht fleeing before them smash over the crest of the hills and drive down the slope.

Although none of the prisoners dared to put their hopes into words, it seemed within the realm of possibility and so none were completely surprised when at about 1400 hours on the afternoon of 27 March gunfire was heard coming from the west.

(41) H.

The Senior American Officer passed the word that the German Commandant was going to move all American officers out of the camp immediately on a forced march to Nurenburg, and that men would use every possible pretext to delay until the last possible moment. Shortly after, guards appeared and ordered all prisoners to pack and prepare to march. Before these preparations could get under way, the guards were recalled and sent out to man the defensive positions in the area, and the forced march was never organized. It should be said that there are probably some former ^{German} prison guards who will always wonder how the American forces were so successful when so many of their officers were so physically uncoordinated and mentally dull. (42)

Approximately two platoons of German guard personnel moved out to occupy prepared positions along the crest of the hill northwest of the enclosures. Two 40-mm Bofors were placed off to one side of the road near the platoon positions where they had command of part of the road from Hammelburg. Also positions which had been hastily prepared along the northern end of camp astride the road were manned by approximately a company. (43) (See Map D)

Not long after the tank fire commenced at the river below, the Bofors opened fire and were joined by small arms fire from the Germans dug in along the crest of the hill. After the shooting had continued for half an hour, HE and smoke shells commenced landing along the crest of the hill in and around the two platoons. Although they had succeeded in delaying the column for an hour and destroying a halftrack, the Germans became completely disorganized, left the trenches and broke for the stalag, pursued by the fire from light tanks and dismounted infantry.

The Germans in position along the prison fence returned the fire with machine guns, rifles and mortars. Two more Bofors guns, (42) H; (43) J.

shooting from the target range to the south suddenly opened up and caught a gasoline loaded halftrack and a jeep in the flank before they could be withdrawn to safety. The two guns ceased fire as suddenly as they had commenced, with the result that, due to the surprise and shock created by their shooting, their location was not detected by the men of the task force. (44)

Light tanks maneuvered into position near a road thirteen or fourteen hundred yards northwest of camp and began to pound guard towers and other possible points from which the enemy might have observation. The range was too great for accurate shooting with 37-mm guns, however, luck was good and several hits were scored. One tower at the northern corner of the compound was hit, and a German guard who had been afraid to come down while the shooting was going on was killed. (45)

The assault gun with the light tanks was joined by the other two at around 1630. While searching out the German fire in the area near the fence, a barrack in the Serbian enclosure was hit and set afire. The smoke billowed forth in great clouds, hung over the area as a dense haze and made accurate observation of the prison stockade itself difficult. The assault guns had fair observation on the road however and lobbed HE into the defenses with good effect. The infantry, also aiming at the German positions along the road, put out a heavy volume of 50 caliber machine gun fire from the guns mounted in their halftracks.

With tracers ricochetting off the brick walls of buildings and along the road, and assault guns and light tanks plastering high explosives on the German buildings and trenches, not only the Germans defending the area, but also the American officers in the camp received the impression that the attack was being made by a major force. (46)

(44) I; (45) H; (46) H.

The Bofors in the target range opened up again at about the time the medium tanks rejoined the force on the hill. This time the flashes of the Bofors were picked up and tank fire quickly brought to bear. (47) An assault gun switched its fire and assisted in saturating the area with HE until all danger from this source was eliminated.

Enemy fire, which at the beginning of the action had been quite heavy, began to diminish. Under supporting cover from the assault guns, and tanks, two infantry platoons moved out toward the camp generally astride the road while another platoon moved down across the fields on the right. As they drew near the Stalag, the German small arms fire increased for a few minutes, but when answered by another heavy pounding from the assault guns, ceased completely.

The infantry on the road pushed past the main gate to the range area a quarter of a mile south, stopped and set up security. (48) As the platoon crossed the field, it was joined and preceded by the light tanks which smashed through the wire.

At this time one of the American prisoners, Lieutenant Colonel John K. Waters, son-in-law of General Patton, and another officer went to the fence carrying a white flag with the intention of directing fire into an area of known resistance. As they approached the fence they were fired upon by a sniper and Colonel Waters was seriously wounded. Although a building to building search was immediately conducted it is not known whether the sniper was apprehended. (49)

Shortly after the firing ceased, Colonel Good circulated orders that all prisoners would pack their personal belongings and be prepared to move by 1900.

It was after 1900 hours by the time the rescued officers had formed a column and started out of the camp, moving past the burning barracks and out through a gap smashed in the wire. By the flickering (47) I; (48) J; (49) H.

light of the fires it was easy to see that the assault on the camp had been costly to the Americans as well as to the Germans, for besides stepping over the bodies of several prison guards it was necessary to pass two dead Americans stopped by rifle fire as they assaulted the fence line.

The released prisoners were marched up to the road in a column of fours to the main body of the Armored task force, (See Map E) and were told to find places on vehicles wherever possible. Despite the darkness, it was obvious almost immediately that the tanks and halftracks in the task force could not carry all of the liberated officers, so it became a matter of first come, first served. Men who two hours before could do no more than move at a shuffle, were running up and down the road looking for a vacant place aboard a tank or halftrack.

Although it was not at first realized that the task force was alone and 80 kilometers from the lines, competition for seats was keen. However, the cold hard facts concerning the exact situation were soon made known to all and those who were unfit for vigorous activity returned to the stockade. Others felt that they would have a better chance by working their way back through the lines alone.

Some officers had previously organized themselves into small "escape teams" of three or four men each, made rough sketches of the area copied from smuggled maps, and devised plans for taking advantage of any opportunity to escape that presented itself. This was just such an opportunity. For the most part, however, those who had gained places on vehicles elected to remain. (50)

Meanwhile the task force commander considered two general courses of action to return to allied territory. The first, strongly advocated by some of his officers, was to continue east, then swing north, across the Saale and attempt by heading northwest, to (50) H.

make eventual contact with the 4th Armored Division. (51) However, as radio contact with the division had been out for the last ten or twelve hours, and the force had no maps of the area to the north, the success of such a move was debatable.

The other course of action was to select an alternate route back to the crossing at Graffendorf and then, staying in the area covered by the maps, move rapidly as possible due west toward the main lines. Enemy opposition would probably be encountered sooner under the second course of action, but the map situation, gas supply, and the lack of any assurance that the force would meet the 4th Armored ruled out the first plan of action. (52)

Three or four light tanks were sent out to reconnoiter a route the use of which would make unnecessary to retrace the exact course taken from Graffendorf.

In the darkness, the mass of prisoners crowding around and into vehicles, did not lessen, nor did the tanks and halftracks seem to be reforming into an organized column. Some were on the hill crest overlooking Hammelburg, others were on the road facing up the hill while still others were headed in the opposite direction. It was apparent that the momentum and speed that had carried Task Force Baum through town after town with such amazing success was spent.

The men and officers were tired and worn before setting out and the sustained drive of the last twenty hours, plus the sudden letdown upon reaching the objective, the hopeless aspect of the future and the confusion of the hundreds of prisoners milling around in the darkness, brought about an inertia and an apathy that would have been a serious problem even under more favorable circumstances. (53)

(51) H; (52) H; (53) H.

Some of the officers of the task force moved through the column, shaking sleeping men, giving instructions to NCO's and making effort, to instill some semblance of efficiency into the exhausted crews. Every vehicle not carrying wounded was so overloaded with hopeful escapees that the crews were told to get rid of excess men by force if necessary, so that the vehicles could operate effectively.

Personal gear and impedimenta were thrown to the ground to make room for all possible riders. Men were shifted around so the machine guns on the tanks could fire without danger of hitting passengers. All extra weapons that could be found were passed out as there was no doubt that it would be necessary to fight to reach the American lines. M1's, Tommy guns, and carbines taken from the wounded, captured German rifles, machine pistols, even personal loot of Lugers and P38's were distributed in order to arm as many men as possible.

The seriousness of the situation was brought forceably home to everyone when two or three bazooka rockets were fired into the parked column by Germans who, under the cover of the noise and darkness, had worked to within firing range. One round hit a tank, putting it out of action, wounding several nearby men. Another round, going wild, hit a large haystack at the side of the road and set it on fire, lighting up the countryside for several hundred yards in all directions. As no one was sure where the shots came from, the Germans were not located. However the incident served as a focal point around which the task force commander and his officers were able to gain tighter control of the column.

Shortly before 2300 hours, Captain Baum succeeded in reforming the column along the same dirt road taken by the light tanks an hour earlier. Although they had not returned from their reconnaissance, they were ordered by radio to meet the main body along the road. (54)
(54) H.

THE RETURN

The column, with three medium tanks in the lead, started down the road which rapidly became a narrow, deeply rutted, stoney cart trail over which even the tanks could not make more than a few miles per hour. The way, instead of improving, became rougher and more difficult to negotiate until finally further progress became impossible. The head of the column doubled back a mile or so until it encountered a trail to the west that had been overlooked on the way in. Faint marks on the rocky surface indicated that the light tanks had made this turn and so the task force headed in the new direction toward another road which ran generally parallel to the cart trail.

As the first tank reached the new road it encountered the light tanks returning from their reconnaissance. The platoon leader made a report concerning the road which ran almost to the town of Hessdorf, and the main highway, and could be reached by a short cross-country trip through the woods. (55)

With a light tank in the lead, the task force turned left and headed in the direction of Hessdorf and the highway. Progress was more rapid than it had been on the previous road in spite of frequent stops at road junctions and crossings to let the vehicles close up.

At about 0130 hours the leading vehicles pulled out of the woods and proceeded into Hessdorf. They were stopped just short of the town square by two German trucks which apparently had been hastily abandoned in the street. The column delayed only long enough for some of the escapees to jump down, move the trucks and resume their places. (56)

The noise of the tanks and halftracks, which might easily have been mistaken for an entire division, awoke the townsfolk with the immediate results that white sheets, towels, and pillowcases appeared fluttering from windows and doors of most of the houses. The fact that the first three tanks took the wrong turn and had to back, roaring and clanking, out of an alley added to the impression (55) H; (56) H.

that the entire American Army had overrun Hessdorf in force.

After much maneuvering and backing, the tanks headed in the right direction and moved on through town to the highway. Upon reaching the highway the column turned right and the three medium tanks in the lead headed toward Gaffendorf by way of Hollrich and Weyersfeld. (See Map E)

The effect of the armored vehicles on the populace of Hessdorf had been quite reassuring and though eventual contact with German forces was a foregone conclusion, it was not expected for some time. This, plus the steady, even rumble of the tanks and halftracks, over the fine road surface had a lulling effect, even on those who had determined to remain alert. (57)

Just as the column was about to enter the town of Hollrich, the lead tank jerked to a halt in front of a stout roadblock. A series of blinding flashes and a salvo of explosions was the first indication to the rest of the column that the force had encountered an enemy trap. This, a panzerfaust attack, disabled the lead tank, killing the tank commander, one of the escapees, and wounding several others. (58) The tank gunner, although dazed by the concussion and completely at a loss as to where the grenades had come from, jumped behind the 50 caliber AA gun and sprayed the area.

The second and third tanks were also fired upon with panzerfaust, but the rounds fell short and neither tank suffered serious damage. It was a different matter however to the men clinging to the decks with no protection. An escapee sitting against the turret of the second tank was killed by a grenade fired in the second volley, and several others were slightly wounded. (59) The assault was such a surprise that a second series of explosions went off before anyone had moved. While escapees jumped for the ditches along side the highway, the crew members of the tanks manned the 30 and 50 caliber (57) H; (58) H; (59) H.

machine guns and fired into the road block and the fields on either side. Due to the fact that the vehicles had jammed up on the damaged tank, none of the heavy calibre guns could be brought to bear. (60)

In the confusion and turmoil that followed it was impossible to determine exactly what was taking place. Red and yellow tracers streaking through the night, chattering of machine guns and yells and shouts of men jumping from the decks of the tanks combined to create a bedlam that can only be described as bewildering. Suddenly all firing ceased and all that could be heard was the noise of idling tank motors and the cries of wounded men.

The narrow highway would not permit turning around, so the tanks and halftracks, still facing the road block, backed off until they could turn without danger of further attack. Liberated prisoners and the survivors from the lead tank crawled along the ditches helping those who had been hurt. The medical peep pulled off to the side of the road and the doctor and his corpsmen were able to give hasty first aid to those in immediate need. (61)

In the meantime the column was getting itself turned around preparatory to retracing its route to Hessdorf. It was hoped that a bypass could be found around Hollrich and the journey toward Graffendorf resumed. By the time the remnants of the column returned to Hessdorf, every one accounted for had remounted a tank or half-track and was hanging on. Although most of the escapees were alert for any new trouble, the men of the task force were not. The action of the last two nights and a day without rest was too much for them and many, standing or sitting, slept even as the column moved. (62)

As the tail of the column passed out of Hessdorf the last half dozen vehicles were stopped when a light tank in the column was fired on and hit by another panzerfaust. Once again all machine guns that could be brought into action opened up and fired in the general

(60) H; (61) H; (62) H.

direction of the attack, though it was impossible to spot positions in the darkness. Another panzerfaust was fired at the halted vehicles and although the fragmentation cut up some ex-PW's who had dismounted, the vehicle was undamaged and the flash disclosed the location of the launcher. It was speedily neutralized. (63)

Upon rejoining the column, those temporarily separated learned that Captain Baum had decided to halt at a likely place to reconstitute his force, redistribute gasoline and ammunition, and then fight west as far as possible. (64)

Hill 427, a short distance from Hollrich, looked like the best spot on the map and so the remnants of the force made their way to that point where they halted to reorganize. There were so many escapees getting in the way with their futile attempts to help that they were advised, with some profanity, "to take off". Many followed this advice. (65)

Upon assembling on Hill 427 it was found that only a little over a hundred men remained as an effective fighting force, the rest having been wounded, captured, killed, or cut off during the previous skirmishes. There were three light tanks, four medium and three assault guns left plus fifteen⁸ halftracks. (66)

It was decided to sacrifice as many halftracks as possible for their gasoline, keeping only enough to carry the wounded. The tanks of eight halftracks were emptied and a thermite grenade tossed into each motor. (67)

It was while the last of the empty halftracks were being drained that the sound of German tanks and armored vehicles could be heard along the road running between Bonnland and Hollrich. (See Map F) All possible haste was made to load and get underway before the Germans could cause any more trouble, but it was too late. The light from the burning vehicles and the noise of the halftrack and tank

(63) H; (64) H; (65) H; (66) F, p. 134; (67) F, p. 134.

engines began to draw small arms fire from enemy foot troops advancing from the road to the south. (68)

The assault guns fired smoke in a vain attempt to lessen the observation of the American force afforded the enemy by the burning vehicles. The tanks open fire with HE and cannister into the dark in the hope of stopping what was apparently an infantry attack. The small arms fire slackened and then stopped, but was continued again in a few minutes, this time accompanied by cannon fire from SP guns along the road. It was still very dark and despite the noise and turmoil none of the vehicles were hit. Nevertheless their vulnerability to the German fire made it necessary to abandon the remaining halftracks. The wounded were taken to a large brick barn on the reverse side of the hill where the doctor had set up a hasty aide station. Several infantrymen hurt by the SP gunfire, were patched up in the aide station and sent back out to help in the fight. However by this time shellfire from the southeast began to fall in the vicinity and it was obvious that the position was becoming untenable. (69)

Two assault guns, a light tank and a couple of halftracks were hit and set afire, and the flames attracted more accurate fire on the hill from the Germans. Any hopes of saving the remaining tanks by further withdrawal were completely dashed when high velocity fire began to smash through the woods from the north. The barn was hit four or five times by this fire, wounding, among others, several men already being treated for previous wounds. It was at this time, that word was passed to scatter and head for the west, every man for himself. (70)

Most of the men, salvaging what personal equipment they could, headed into the woods and disappeared leaving only the wounded and medics in the barn. A short time later the Germans moved onto the hill (68) K; (69) K; (70) K.

and immediately started clearing the area. They shipped the wounded back to the prison hospital at Stalag Hammelburg and drove off all vehicles that could still be moved, leaving the rest to burn. (71)

Daylight found Hill 427, littered with smashed and burned vehicles, shell-scarred trees, and a badly damaged barn. Nothing else was left to indicate the existence of Task Force Baum.

The report of this action would not be complete without mention of the dismay and confusion created by the short but meteoric existence of Task Force Baum. The German populace along the route from Schweinheim, Gemunden, Graffendorf and Hammelburg were in a confused and almost hysterical state. Troops in Gemunden, due to move to Aschaffenburg and Hanau were retained in the area for a least four days. (72)

Daylight also disclosed the large number of front line German troops in the vicinity and the thoroughness with which the area from Gemunden to Hammelburg was being organized for defense. Machine gun positions and anti-tank defenses were at every strategic location. Bridges were prepared for demolition and trench systems and fox holes were under construction.

The civilian populace was rounded up, and with the military, formed into long skirmish lines that with the aid of hounds from the prison camp kennel, combed the area for survivors and escapees. (73)

Although it is reported that a few actually succeeded in making good their escape nearly all were recaptured within three or four days. The reported casualties sustained by Task Force Baum were thirty-two wounded, nine killed, and sixteen missing. There are no figures covering the casualties suffered by the PW's.

(71) J; (72) H; (73) H.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

5 April

This operation was unusual even in the annals of armored exploitation. It illustrates very forceably certain principles of tactics and technique worthy of attention from military students.

Probably the most obvious criticism is of the operation itself. Undoubtedly the ruse, which tricked the Germans into holding reserves vitally needed at the front, in the Aschaffenburg area, is worth considerable recognition. However, as General Patton himself remarked, "Never send a boy on a man's job, the larger the force and the more violence you use in the attack.....the smaller will be your proportionate losses". The size and composition of Task Force Baum should have dictated its use to exploit a local success only, or since depth and distance were prime considerations, to exploit as part of a larger force. As the secondary mission was to effect the release of a large number of PW's, it stands to reason that consideration of additional transportation was definitely in order. As it was, the expedition had to travel much too far with far too little. *Not Complete*

The haste with which the task force was dispatched was reason for giving only minimum attention to details of supply and plan of operation. It did not permit men and officers, already tired from past actions, to sleep or rest in preparation for the new move. Since all night marches are necessarily conducted at close interval and demand close and concentrated attention by all personnel, especially when in enemy territory, they are unusually fatiguing with a resultant decline in capability. It is probably that with the proper rest prior to departure, the staying power and the combat efficiency of all would have been retained over a longer period of time.

Captain Baum took advantage of speed and violence of attack to carry him through many towns and villages between Schweinheim and Gemunden. The enemy, usually caught completely by surprise, was able to do little more than offer token resistance before the fast moving column had smashed through and disappeared in the night.

The information concerning the marshalling yard in Gemunden was relayed to Division Headquarters by a liaison plane flying out to pick up messages. The results of the air strike following receipt of the message graphically illustrated the value of using planes to maintain contact with a unit operating deep in enemy territory when no other means of communicating exists. Although the task force would not have benefited to any degree by continued radio contact with its headquarters in this particular instance, it might, on some future occasion, result in the success or failure of a complete operation.

When the column reached Gemunden, the important element of surprise was lacking and it became obvious that audacity and speed alone would not carry it through the town. The infantry was deployed from march column in order to launch the attack in close support of the tanks. Although three of the tanks were lost during the battle, the number of losses would surely have been greater without the assistance and protection furnished by the infantry.

In spite of a supply of maps and the ability to read them there are occasions when directions or guidance from people who are familiar with the area are of great assistance. Such was the case when the column was forced to seek crossings of the Sinn and Saale rivers. The maps showed the bridges, but did not indicate whether or not they would support the weight of the tanks. Prisoners who talked furnished the desired information.

The task force commander did not use the reconnaissance section as frontal security at any time during the entire operation. Either medium or light tanks were always in front where their armor and fire power could be utilized to the fullest. Proper use of the lightly armored reconnaissance sections was illustrated when they were utilized as a rear covering force for the main body in the

withdrawal from Gemunden. They were again properly employed when light patrols were sent out to gain observation on the two enemy tanks that were sighted near Ober Eschenbach. In this, the power of the forward thrust of the column was retained by the medium tanks and at the same time measures were taken to prevent surprise and possible defeat from an attack on the flank.

The simple plan to use the medium tanks as ^aholding force while the lighter vehicles continued on toward the objective saved valuable time when the German tanks were encountered near Pfaffenhausen. The time saved increased the surprise effect upon the enemy and assisted in his defeat.

Although the morale of the prisoners in the camp was low, the senior officer in camp did not relax his standards of discipline. This did much in sustaining some men who would otherwise have been unable to carry on.

When the light tanks began to register on the located German troops in the vicinity of the camp, no consideration was given to the possibility of there being unlocated enemy gun positions. It was due to this oversight that two vehicles were destroyed by the Bofors guns located south of the camp.

The reorganization of Task Force Baum after reaching its objective is a good example of the problem a unit commander encounters after a violent and strength-dissipating attack. The fact that the enemy did not immediately counterattack was no indication that he was doing nothing. If the task force had been able to get under way within an hour after the release of the prisoners, it is possible that the column might have gotten to Graffendorf before being stopped, thus enhancing the chances of eventual escape for all concerned.

Radio communication between elements of the force was of value throughout the entire operation. The reconnaissance patrols protecting the flank of the column near Ober Eschenbach could not

have kept contact by any other means, and radio was necessary for the prompt deployment of the medium tanks when they ran into the Mark III's near Pfaffenhausen. It was used continually to maintain control during all moves in the darkness. It was necessary for the proper conduct of the expedition.

On the move from the prison camp to Hessdorf, the leading light tank commander stopped at every critical point along the route to enable the column to close up and prevent any vehicles from making wrong turns and becoming lost.

The task force moved through Hessdorf and started down the highway with three medium tanks in the lead. It should be noted that these tanks were traveling as an integral part of the column with close interval between vehicles and no security, as such, was provided. When the foremost tank hit the road block there was not time for the surprised column to stop before all vehicles became jammed. The heavier weapons of the tanks could not be used and there was no room in which to maneuver.

It was fortunate for the people near the head of the column that the enemy defenses were no stronger than they were. When the column was stopped, the crews of the tanks and halftracks despite the darkness immediately manned machine guns and placed heavy fire on the road block and into the fields along the road. Although the results in enemy casualties were unknown the shooting did keep the enemy in his holes so that he could not return the fire.

The leadership and courage of Captain Baum and his immediate subordinates was unquestionable. However, although the force was able to reach its objective, and although it certainly created confusion in the enemy rear, it is felt that the operation was

only partly successful. In analysing the judgement of the commander ordering the mission it is seen that he ignored the important principles of time and organization to such a degree that the results of the effort were obvious before it began. The leader of the lower unit is obligated, among other things, to show leadership and courage in accomplishing assigned missions. The higher commander is even more responsible in seeing that these qualities are given a fair chance of success by proper judgement and planning.

LESSONS

1. A unit should not be given an exploitation mission beyond its inherent capabilities.
2. Lack of sleep and rest lowers combat efficiency and staying power.
3. Speed and violence of attack saves time and lives during exploitation.
4. Planes may be effectively used to maintain contact with units otherwise out of communication.
5. Tanks should be closely supported by infantry in town fighting.
6. Captured enemy personnel may be used to advantage by a force operating in the enemy's rear.
7. Proper use of light reconnaissance will conserve the strength of a unit as well as give it security.
8. A simple plan well executed will enhance chances of success in battle.
9. Strict discipline is often necessary in times of hardship.
10. A unit engaging known enemy position must be on the alert for fire from unknown positions.
11. Reorganization, to be successful, must be conducted with all possible speed.

12. Radio communication is essential for proper control of tanks.
13. To maintain control of a column traveling at night without route markers or guides, the head of the column should stop at critical points to permit the vehicles to close.
14. Failure to utilize effective security when in proximity of the enemy is a grave error.
15. A large volume of automatic weapons fire may be effective in pinning down an enemy even when his exact location is undetermined.
16. Courage and leadership alone cannot insure the success of an operation.